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AUTHOR Kochman, Thomas
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ABSTRACT

This paper draws from a number of sources, from Muhammad Ali to TV commercials, to demonstrate the quite different conceptions that black and white Americans have of the meaning of boasting and bragging. For blacks, boasting and bragging are two distinct ways of speaking and communication. Boasting is a joking, playful verbal behavior, not to be taken literally. A good boaster is admired as is a good joke teller; in fact, the verbal behavior involved is very similar. On the other hand, bragging is a serious form of self-aggradizement, quite distinct from playful boasting. For whites, especially Anglo-Saxon whites, both boasting and bragging are to be taken seriously and both are considered to be in bad taste. People who boast and brag are called egotists and "show-offs." It is shown: (1) that white conceptions and interpretations of boasting/bragging and black conceptions and interpretations of boasting/bragging are in conflict, and (2) that there is great potential for misunderstandings in black-white interactions because of this conflict. It is important for individuals in public service roles who interact with both blacks and whites, and especially with both groups simultaneously, to be aware of the differences in black and white communicative behaviors and the potential for conflict and misunderstanding. (Author/AMH)

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BOASTING AND BRAGGING: "BLACK" AND "WHITE"

Thomas Kochman
University of Illinois at Chicago

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Richard Bauman
Joel Sherzer
EDITORS
The University of Texas, Austin

James H. Perry
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

For further information contact:

OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS
SEDL
211 East 7th Street
Austin, Texas 78701

BOASTING AND BRAGGING: "BLACK" AND "WHITE"

Thomas Kochman

It all started twenty years past
The greatest of them all was born at last
The very first words from his Louisville lip
"I'm pretty as a picture, and there's no one I can't whip..."

Muhammad Ali, "Feats of Clay"

For both blacks and whites, boasting and bragging refer to "vocal self-praise or claims to superiority over others" (The American College Dictionary, 1947:133). But in other respects, blacks and whites conceive of the behaviors designated by those terms differently. How they do and how their different conceptions affect black/white communication will be the focus of the present analysis.

Black Boasting

One criterion always distinguishes black boasting. That is, that it is a source of humor; it is not intended to be taken seriously. Another characteristic, but not an invariant one, is its obvious exaggeration; no relationship between words and deeds need exist. Nor is there any obligation on the part of the boaster to make them correspond. Thus, boasts don't have to be proven for example. So one hears from black players ('ladies men') "My rap is so strong, you won't know whether you comin' or goin'" (Faith Sloan), and, "I got more women than Van Camp has poke n' beans" (Arthur Clay). Muhammed Ali says (1975:295) "I can hit you before God gets the news" and "Kid" says:

> I'm so fast, a girl told me one time, she said, "Kid, now if you can get some cock 'fore my mother get back home, and she's coming 'round the corner right now, you can have it." So I said, "Lay down." She layed down, I pushed the light switch, got undressed, jumped in bed, busted two nuts, got dressed and got outside the room before that room got dark (Abrahams, 1964:241).

Nor is black boasting exclusively a male speech activity. For example, black women also boast, as "If I tell you a hen dips snuff, look under his left wing and you'll find a can," or, "I can look through muddy water and spy dry land. I can look through any bush and spy my man," (Marie Holt).[1]

Moreover, these same features distinguish black boasting in the West Indies. This suggests that we are dealing with an originally African speech pattern that has been disseminated widely throughout Afro-America.[2] For example, Reisman reports from Antigua (1974:60):

> Antiguan boasting is not the serious claim to serious accomplishment, nor the non-humorous assertion by a hero which it might be death to challenge. The response to it almost always contains some appreciative laughter and shrieking.

Abrahams offers the following rhyming boast from Tobago in which the sexual feats of the man of a couple recently caught at illicit love-making are publicly proclaimed and exaggerated with the singer assuming the role of the male fornicator (1972:228):

> When I gi' she seven
> She t'ink she was in heaven.
> When I gi' she eight
> She lay down 'traight.

When I gi' she nine
She started to whine.
When I gi' she ten
Den my cock ben'.

Black Bragging

Unlike black boasting, black bragging is a serious form of self-aggrandizement; thus, there is an element of accountability present: claims have to be proven whether it is a question of ability, possessions or social status. But there is also a sense of appropriateness about bragging itself, apart from whether the deed proclaimed is demonstrable or whether a claim to possessions or social status can be validated. Here, black etiquette differentiates bragging about one's ability from bragging about one's possessions or social status.

Bragging about ability. Blacks view bragging about one's ability negatively. As Muhammad Ali has said (1975:106), no one likes a braggart, and Ali has shrewdly capitalized on this attitude throughout his career as a negative attention-getting device to draw a crowd. "I had fought before, but now the crowd was calling my name, calling out against me. What mattered was that they were alive to me" (ibid.). However, if the persons who are bragging are capable of demonstrating that they can do what they claim, then blacks no longer consider it bragging ("If a person can do it, it ain't even braggin'"). Moreover, there is then also a marked positive shift in attitude towards that person.

A nice example of this can be found in the record Animal Tales Told in the Gullah Dialect in which "Buh Rabbit" (Brother Rabbit) confronts "Buh Whale" (Brother Whale) and brags as follows: "Buh whale, little as I is and big as you is I bet I could pull you out dat river." To this Buh Whale

scornfully replies, "Go along Buh Rabbit. What kind of talk are you to talk. You couldn't move me in de river scusin for pullin me out." But after Buh Rabbit successfully pulls Buh Whale out of the river (unwittingly assisted by "Buh Olifaum" (Brother Elephant) and comes to collect his bet, Buh Whale expresses the following admiration and praise: "Great shish, Buh Rabbit. You sure are an...able little man..." So Ali came to be admired and ever imitated when he began to demonstrate to the black community that he was in fact "The Greatest," in both words and deeds ("Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee...").[3]

Bragging about possessions. Blacks view bragging about one's possessions or the social achievement of oneself or one's children negatively and still consider it bragging even though the claim may be proven true. This is in marked contrast to bragging about one's ability. There are several reasons for this different attitude. One is that it offends community blacks' basic egalitariansim. Thus, they link bragging about "how much money" or "how many cars" one has, or one's social status, to being "conceited" or "thinking oneself better than the next person."[4] This applies to blacks as well as whites; as Murray put it (1970:135), the one thing blacks don't tolerate from successful blacks is arrogance.

Another reason that it offends blacks is that they feel a black person's ability has very little to do with a person "making it" in American society. Thus, blacks with ability, due to racism, have historically been rendered socially immobile or impotent. Those blacks who have achieved a measure of success in the world of work relative to other blacks, at best, are seen as having gotten "the breaks"; at worst, they are suspected of having made it by having sacrificed a dimension of their personal, cultural

or racial price, often expressed as "forgetting where they came from" or "losing face."[5]

But why should bragging about one's possessions or social status not be considered potentially redeemable (that is, not be considered "bragging" upon being shown to be true) while bragging about one's ability is? One of my black students (Allen Harris) thinks it has to do with possessions or social status not being unique ("One Cadillac can be made to look like any other Cadillac. But nobody can duplicate Ali's punch"). Yet there is another element also, implicit in Harris' remark that might also explain the different attitude. That is the cultural value that blacks have toward superior performance, which celebrates not only individual virtuosity but the sharing of it by the community. As Abrahams put it (1972:28), it is through performance that "the group and the performing individuals achieve a sense of fulfillment--the group because it has come together and celebrated its overt values and the individual because his abilities have been utilized and tested in a manner that allows him to achieve status." Bragging about one's possessions or social achievement on the other hand has no communal potential. Quite the contrary, in promoting or reinforcing the bases of individual or class segregation it is seen as socially divisive.

White Boasting/Bragging

For whites, the terms boasting and bragging seem to refer to the same speech behavior.[6] To indicate this, the terms are represented here as boasting/bragging.

White Boasting/Bragging vis-a-vis Black Boasting

Unlike black boasting, which is not to be taken seriously, white boasting/bragging is. A prototype can be found in the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf. A contemporary sports example is football quarterback Joe Namath's famous

boast that the underdog New York Jets would win the 1969 Super Bowl against the highly favored Baltimore Colts; it was given and received seriously.

Furthermore, whites conceive that when a boast/brag is made, it has to be more or less immediately acted upon. Any attempt to avoid having to "prove" it would invite ridicule. Thus, the rule among white male peers: "Don't boast/brag unless and until you can make it good." The consequence of this rule is that the correspondence between boasts and projected feats historically has remained quite literal, as for example in Beowulf (Raffel, 1963:49):

> The Danes had been served as he'd boasted he's serve them;
> Beowulf, A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel.

White boasting/bragging also contrasts with black boasting with respect to the etiquette governing its assertion. The negative attitude of whites towards the speech act applies to the fact of the boast/brag being asserted at all. The contents are not the principal issue; neither is the time and place of its occurrence. Nor are those who boast/brag protected from criticism if they succeed in proving their claim, since the pejorative term "show-off" can always be applied afterwards. It seems, therefore, that there never is an entirely "right" time to boast in white culture. Black etiquette, on the other hand, considers boasting the way it does other forms of expressive behavior, namely as entertainment. Thus, were boasting to be criticized, it would be the way telling a joke might be: it was a bad joke, or, it was the wrong time and place to tell it. But as with other forms of individual assertiveness and display that constitute "showing off" in black culture, idiomatically referred to as <u>showboating</u>, <u>stylin' out</u>, <u>grannin'</u> ('grandstanding'), there is also a <u>right</u> time for boasting to occur. Thus, disapproving remarks, such as "lame," "country" or "off the wall," that

blacks might make in response to a black person "showing off," should be understood as commenting on the intelligence or artfulness of the presentation, not on the fact of its assertion.

White Boasting/Bragging vis-a-vis Black Bragging

White boasting/bragging clearly resembles black bragging more than black boasting. Within both conceptions the person praising his deeds or possessions can be expected to be held accountable: claims once made have to be validated.

Boasting/bragging about ability. When the bragging is about ability, the white concept differs from the black concept in that whites still consider it to be bragging even when the person demonstrates his ability to do what he says. A case in point is chess champion Bobby Fischer, who throughout his career, has constantly been criticized for being "cocky" and "brash" in customarily asserting his own chess preeminence, notwithstanding his consistent demonstration of it.[7] Fuller represents this attitude entirely in explaining his personal dislike of Muhammad Ali (1978:18):

> Ali was the idol of millions, especially but not exclusively of blacks. Here I must confess that I have always, in the loose language of the antifan, "hated" him, always rooted for anyone against him. That was because I detested his persona, his strutting and chest beating, his doggerel predictions of knockout rounds, his ring clowning and "rope-a-dope" tricks, his braying, "I'm the Greatest!" Mind you, it was not the man but the persona I hated....
> But I felt no guilt; if it was his right to adopt that mask it was my right to loathe it, knowing his skills, aware that he was a great ring figure... (emphasis added). Black etiquette however considers it

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bragging (and views it negatively) when the brag cannot be accomplished. When it can, it no longer qualifies as a brag ("no brag, just fact").

Boasting/bragging about possessions or social achievement. In the 1947 edition of The American College Dictionary, boasting was defined as "speaking exaggeratedly and objectionably, esp. about oneself" (p. 133, emphasis added). This definition certainly agrees with the white cultural view offered here. However, in the 1968 Random House Dictionary (p. 148), boasting was defined as speaking "with exaggeration and pride, esp. about oneself or someone or something connected with oneself." The phrase "and objectionably" was dropped in the later edition. Since I do not know why, I assume that citations were found that showed contexts of use which reflected attitudes that were inconsistent with the earlier "white" definition. For example, black attitudes towards claims to superiority over others ("no competition") which would later be proven valid--which whites would consider bragging and view negatively, though blacks would not--would justify dropping the phrase "and objectionably." But I think it is also necessary to consider as a factor, what was added in the 1968 edition, namely, the phrase "or someone or something connected with oneself." This is because, in contrast with black etiquette, which views bragging about possessions or social achievement negatively, the attitude of other ethnic groups often considers such bases of self-aggrandizement positively. Thus, Eastern European Jews often kvell ('swell with pride') or derive naches ('prideful pleasure') from the achievements of their children or grandchildren. As Rosten says (1970:201):

> Jewish parents are most energetic in kvelling over their children's endowments (real or illusory), achievements (major or minor), or praise from others (sincere or obligatory).

To that, one can add the prestige that one acquires from having achieved the status of "doctor," "professor" or "engineer" among Jews, Germans, Ukrainians, Greeks, Poles, Lithuanians, etc., to get a sense that claims to superiority based upon educational and professional achievement are considered positively in those groups.[8] In this sense the negative attitudes of blacks towards the pretensions of social achievement are in direct opposition.

A Cross-Cultural Example

As might be expected, situations occur in which the different meanings that blacks and whites attach to boasting and bragging collide. One example of such a situation is that reported by my student, Joan McCarty. It occurred in a television interview with some black basketball players and their white coach from Morgan Park High School. Their team had just won by one point a very tough championship basketball game. One of the main players of the team, on being asked to comment upon their opponents, was serious at first, talking about their "playing hard and matching us height for height," etc. However, he ended up with the exultant and self-congratulatory, "But we were just too good for them!" At this point his teammates joined in as a chorus, each one loudly assenting and "slapping five". McCarty said, "Even the black sports announcer started smiling at that." Of course, it was also at this point that the white coach felt obliged to step in, and, as McCarty said, "clean it up," by extending the customary white compliments and credits to a "defeated but valiant opponent," etc.

Summary Analysis

The basis for the white coach's response was that he interpreted (or at least responded to) the blacks' behavior in terms of the white

concept of boasting/bragging. Within this conception the teammates congratulating themselves violated white norms, specifically the demands of modesty which expect performers to understate the value of their achievement. In praising themselves, the black players did just the opposite. Moreover, since their claims to superiority were directly linked to a real accomplishment, they acquired implications (from the white perspective) of "unsportsmanlike conduct:" "gloating" over the defeat of one's opponent, or "rubbing it in." This violates the white norm that one should be "charitable" to the opponent one has just defeated. Consequently, the white coach felt the need to intervene and reestablish the dominance of white decorum rules.

Blacks,of course, would see the above kind of self-congratulation as boasting, a source of humor, thus, the "smiling" of the black sports announcer, and the laughter of Joan McCarty, Allen Harris and other black students of mine who watched the game. The basis for their response was the obvious irony of the remark--the win coming from a successful 30 foot jump shot with one second left to play. Also to be considered was the exultation of the teammates. Were the team to have won by twenty-five points ("going away") there would have been considerably less triumphant joy on the part of the team since the element of irony (luck or chance) would have been absent. Thus a statement like "We were just too good for them" in that situation would be, from the black perspective, a simple statement of fact; it would not be bragging (as whites would interpret it) because it was proven true ("no brag just fact"). It wouldn't be boasting because, with the element of irony absent, the basis of humor would be lost. Thus, the self-praise of the team might elicit admiration and praise from

blacks as successful performances do, but hardly laughter. The team losing by one point, if it were black, would hardly be piqued at the self-praise of members of the winning team since they would have probably done the same thing if they had won. Were the losing team to be white however, and to interpret the black boast in terms of the white cultural conception (q.v.), they might be upset. On the other hand, if television commercials are an index; e.g., Matt Snell for "Lite Beer," O.J. Simpson for "Foster Grants," the black conception of boasting may finally be in the process of becoming publicly understood. In that instance whites might interpret and even respond to black boasting the way blacks do, recognizing it not as an unwarranted or uncouth claim to superiority but as humor, as "the assertion of oneself, the making of one's noise, which depends not so much on the specific content of the boast as on the fact that it is made--loudly--at all" (Reisman, 1974:60).

Footnotes

1. These black female boasts seem less exaggerated than those of black males. Whether this distinction carries through the culture I don't know. Also, as might be expected, they celebrate different attributes (powers of observation, intuition). On the other hand, the first "female" boast: "If I tell you a hen dips snuff...," I also have as a "male" boast: "If I say a chicken dips snuff, don't ask how I know. Just get the W. T. Garrett from under his wing" (Arthur Clay).

2. This inference is especially strong in that the white ("Anglo") concept of boasting/bragging (q.v.) has neither of these two elements. That would preclude, therefore, the possibility of Anglo-Saxon origin of this speech form and subsequent black borrowing of it as a result of black/white contact. Rather, white contests in the South on "who can tell the biggest lie," that reflect an exaggeration characteristic of black boasting, seem to indicate the reverse: white borrowing of an expressive black speech form.

3. Self praise after an accomplishment would not be considered bragging by definition. But it may be boasting and often is since if you're good "people expect you to boast about it" (Allen Harris). An example, is Muhammad Ali telling reporters who were surprised at his win over George Foreman, "Didn't I tell you I was 'The Greatest.' Why don't you believe me?" That this was not serious self-aggrandizement can be seen from a television interview in which Ali seriously compared himself to fighters of the past and in which he said, when asked if he was the greatest (paraphrase): "I can't really say I'm the greatest because there were a lot of great fighters..." Where Ali mostly engaged in bragging, boasting, and the more aggressive woofing (as in the weigh-in for the first Sonny Liston fight and at other times with Joe Frazier (Ali 1975, p. 115, 250ff.) was in his prefight promotion, which Ali himself called "campaigning." It was part of the pretense of being serious that blacks typically saw through, but white Americans did not. The English were better in that respect, perhaps owing to their own "rich spoofing tradition" (Slater 1976:7) as Ali himself describes (p. 111):

> On the night before the Cooper fight, I had announced that I was the uncrowned King of Heavyweights. And Jack Solomon, the old English promoter, took me to a theatrical outfitter, who made up a king's crown for my head and a royal robe... Now that I look back, I'm surprised at the sense of humor they had. They seemed to understand what I was doing even more than the people back home. They knew I was campaigning: "This ain't no jive. Henry Cooper will fall in five."

4. When it occurs it is put down, especially so when the claim is shown to be inflated. Thus when "one dude bragged about 'having a Cadillac,'

and it turned out to belong to his mother, I said, 'So what makes it yours?'" (Faith Sloan)

5. The latter reason also explains why black entertainers and hustlers, as opposed to "working" blacks, are often seen as career models for poor black urban youth. As Keil noted, they are among the few black males who are seen as wearing their black image in "real comfort" (1966:20). Moreover, their material success is more closely seen as a reflection of ability: "men who are clever and talented enough to be financially well off without working" (Keil, p. 20). As one black hustler told Hudson (1972:415) "I shall not work... Dig, if you ever see me with a pick and shovel in my hand you'd better grab one too, because you'll know that I've struck gold."

   But blacks also feel ability should be given the primary credit it deserves. Thus community blacks didn't like it when Ernie Banks and Gale Sayers publicly attributed their success to the white owners of the Cubs and Bears (Wrigley and Halas, respectively) who "gave them the opportunity" ("Their success was directly owing to their ability." "Wrigley and Halas just opened a door that had no business being closed to begin with.").

6. The American College Dictionary published by Random House in 1947, attempted to distinguish two types of behavior, boasting referring to "a particular ability or possession... which may be of such kind as to justify a good deal of pride," whereas bragging, "suggests a more ostentatious and exaggerated boasting but less well-founded" (p. 133). But this distinction gets lost in the 1968 edition of The Random House Dictionary where bragging is defined entirely in terms of boasting (p. 162, College Edition). This is not to say that whites don't differentiate their use of the terms; e.g., boasting "before the fact" and bragging "after the fact" (Kathy Kovacic). But the same behavior seems to be designated in each case.

7. This is because the "demands of modesty" of white culture, expect performers to 1) understate their true ability or the value of a particular achievement, like "brushing off as routine an electifying 75-yard dash through enemy lines" (McDowell 1976:16), and 2) regard congratulations and applause for an accomplishment to be appropriate only when it comes from someone other than the performers themselves.

8. White pretentiousness about their social position is often communicated implicitly, by one's "exclusive" address, where and when one goes on vacation, whether one has a nanny (Wolfe 1966) or by other forms of conspicuous consumption, rather than by direct verbal self-inflation.

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BOASTING AND BRAGGING: RELEVANCE STATEMENT

In this paper, Thomas Kochman draws on a number of sources, from Muhammad Ali to TV commercials, to demonstrate the quite different conceptions that Black and White Americans have of the meaning of boasting and bragging. For Blacks, boasting and bragging are two distinct ways of speaking and communicating. Boasting is a joking, playful verbal behavior, not to be taken literally. A good boaster is admired as is a good joke teller; in fact, the verbal behavior involved is very similar. On the other hand, bragging is a serious form of self-aggrandizement, quite distinct from playful boasting.

For Whites, especially Anglo-Saxon Whites, both boasting and bragging are to be taken seriously and both are considered to be in bad taste. People who boast and brag are called egotists and "show-offs."

Kochman shows that White conceptions and interpretations of boasting/bragging and Black conceptions and interpretations of boasting/bragging are in conflict and that there is great potential for misunderstandings in Black-White interactions because of this conflict. It is important for individuals in public service roles who interact with both Blacks and Whites and especially with both groups simultaneously (teachers, police, judges, social workers, doctors, etc.) to be aware of these (and other) Black and White communicative behaviors and especially their differences and potential for conflict and misunderstnading.